

What Both Parties Can Learn from New York

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There is nothing in American politics quite like a mayoral race in New York City. The extraordinary ethnic diversity, byzantine election laws, range of necessary campaign tactics and, because it is the last place in the US where people still read newspapers, intense media climate, of New York makes politics there unlike anything else in the country. Moreover, the most exciting mayoral elections in New York are often Democratic primaries.

In recent years, 1977, 1989 and even 2001 have been intensely competitive Democratic primaries with great story lines and great characters. Ed Koch's transition from the congressman from Greenwich Village to the law and order candidate allowed him to emerge from a crowded field of seven Democratic candidates including such once and future legends of New York politics as Mario Cuomo and Bella Abzug in 1977. Koch's defeat at the hands of David Dinkins in the Democratic Primary 12 years later and the exciting four way primary in 2001 where Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, on the strength of historic Latino turnout, almost won the primary in a runoff were all great theatre and great politics as well.

The mayoral election of 2009 does not look like it will be as exciting as any of those great campaigns. Instead incumbent mayor Michael Bloomberg will likely get reelected for a third term without much difficulty. While we New Yorkers can lament that we are not getting the great drama we like to see in our mayoral election, there might be a broader message in this election for both major parties. Bloomberg, while registered as an independent, has been an on and off Republican since he first ran for mayor in 2001, and will be that party's nominee again this year. New York is, of course, a heavily Democratic city, but if Bloomberg wins, for the first time in our history, we will have five consecutive terms of Republican mayors. To look at it another way, the last time the city elected a Democratic mayor was 1989 a year when Barack Obama was a law student; the Soviet Union still existed; and a blackberry was a fruit. Further, there have been not one, but two terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center since a Democrat was last elected mayor of New York.

It seems there is something instructive in this state of affairs for both parties. First, although Michael Bloomberg would currently have a hard time getting elected as a Republican in many places outside New York, he is the kind of candidate for which the Republicans should be looking. Bloomberg projects fiscal confidence and knowledge, and, while too conservative in this area for many, has economic views that are not out of synch with many Republican voters. While his economic views will not alienate Republicans, his views on social issues are much closer to those of mainstream America than, for example, the views of Bobby Jindal or Sarah Palin are. While not exactly a strong activist for abortion rights or gay marriage, to name a few hot button social issues, Bloomberg is not a belligerent opponent of these positions either. Time is on the side of the Democrats on these issues, so the best Republican strategy is to find

candidates who, like Bloomberg simply do not prioritize these issues, or are weak supporters of these ideas.

Temperamentally, Bloomberg projects a maturity and a comfort with dialog that is difficult to find among much of the leadership of the Republican Party, but which almost all voters seem to want. In this respect he is not unlike the pre-2008 John McCain. Candidates with temperaments like Bloomberg's are essential if the Republican Party has any chance of growing beyond its angry base.

For the Democratic Party, the New York mayor's race is a reminder of a different kind. The party is poised to lose its fifth consecutive mayoral race in a city where they enjoy a registration advantage over Republicans of roughly six to one. One can try to excuse away this away using demographics of money, but since 1989 losing Democratic candidates for mayor have been African American, Latino and white, Jewish and Christian, male and female. Democrats have lost when severely outspent and when campaign spending has been equalized by New York's strong campaign finance laws. Democrats have lost in good economic times and in bad, with Democratic and Republican presidents in office, and when the country has been at war and at peace.

Given this, it seems like the problem might lie with the Democratic Party, and probably has relevance beyond the five boroughs of New York City. Unlike the 2006 and 2008 national campaigns, recent Democratic candidates for mayor in New York have not had the luxury of running against failed parties and failed presidents. Without this enormous advantage, the Democratic Party in New York has been unable to persuade voters that they offer meaningful solutions to a range of problems including education, public safety and fiscal management. More significantly, they have utterly failed to articulate a compelling progressive vision for urban America. The lesson for the national party is that in the few places where Republican Party candidates are not dysfunctional and on the ideological fringes, the Democrats still need to do some work on figuring out what to say to voters. Unless they do this, if the Republicans were willing and able to nominate Bloomberg type candidates in other parts of the country, the Democratic moment might dissipate pretty quickly.